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SUBJECT: Niger: Municipal Elections Pass Quietly; Ruling Party Polls Strongly while Opposition Boycotts

Ref: a) Niamey 1013 b) Niamey 1011 c) Niamey 1009

¶1. Summary: Municipal elections of December 27 occurred without violence; preliminary Government of Niger (GON) tallies indicate a strong showing by ruling party-affiliated candidates and a GON-alleged overall voter turnout of 56 percent. Although that figure appears high based on mission personnel observations in Niamey, the Opposition's appeal for a boycott of balloting may have been partially successful. One media report indicated that participation may have been as low as 5 percent. The poll took place despite ongoing negotiations between the GON and the political Opposition in Niamey. End summary.

Elections Pass Quietly; GON, Opposition Make Appeals

¶2. On December 27, municipal elections took place in Niger peacefully and with apparent low turnout, without any reported incidents of violence. Defense and security forces, as has been practice, cast ballots the day before, and the GON closed land borders for the day. The event brings to a close Niger's 2009 elections cycle.

¶3. Although the campaign period closed on December 24, the Opposition Coordination of Forces for Democracy and the Republic (CFDR) issued a December 26 declaration appealing to members to boycott the election, stating that, "These elections are the latest step undertaken by the illegal and illegitimate rule of Tandja." Minister of Communication and Government Spokesman Kassoum Maman Moctar responded on December 27 to call the appeal "ridiculous" and urge citizens to vote in a spirit of "independence and liberty." As President Tandja voted, he noted that the elections advanced Niger on the "path of democracy and development." The elections, he noted, marked a milestone in the "achievement of the democratic process."

Provisional Results - 56 Percent Rate of Participation

¶4. More than 49,000 candidates ran for 3,759 seats as advisors in the 266 communes of Niger. While definitive results are yet to be determined, preliminary indications from GON-run daily newspaper "Le Sahel" note a strong showing by ruling party MNSD (Movement for a Developing Society)-affiliated candidates and a provisional turnout of roughly 56 percent, although balloting summaries provided for various communes so far indicate a range of participation from 25 to 101 percent. One independent newspaper, "Le Democrate," labeled the local elections a fiasco and suggested that the rate of participation was lower than 5 percent. The Opposition has not commented on the turnout, which gave appearances to mission personnel in Niamey as having been low. According to GON-run television "Tele Sahel," there were some municipalities where polls could not be held because the "procedure for the submission of candidacies was not respected" and where balloting materials were late in arriving.

Various Regional, Domestic Groups Observe Elections

¶5. According to "Le Sahel," several groups including the International Network of Electoral Observers (Le Reseau International des Observateurs Electoraux - RIOE), African Diaspora, Fraternal Union of West African Peoples (L'Union Fraternelle des Populations de l'Afrique de l'Ouest - UFRAPAO), and two national NGOs observed the elections and declared that they appeared to be well administered, credible, and non-violent. (Note: None of these groups is known to mission personnel, and post regards them to be of untested competence and uncertain neutrality. End note.)

Comment

¶6. The elections took place despite the ongoing inclusive dialogue between the GON and the political Opposition mediated by retired Nigerian head of state and General Abdusalam Abubakar (reftels), slated to re-start on December 29, a date that also marks the return to session of the National Assembly. The provisional results may indicate a partial success for the political Opposition, as a 56 percent turnout rate (if believable) does not reflect a strong mandate, even if Sunday is market day in many localities. End comment.

ALLEN